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ABSTRACT

This program focuses on the elective English programs which are, in whole or in part, replacing traditional English offerings at the secondary school level. It is suggested that the newer elective English programs differ from traditional ones in at least six ways: (1) elective programs consist of a wide variety of courses; (2) students are generally free to choose the courses they feel will be most meaningful to them; (3) most programs permit all students to select courses they want, regardless of their grade level; (4) most elective programs insist upon a greater awareness of individual student abilities and interests; (5) elective programs produce, or at least reflect, a much stronger sense of professionalism among teachers of English; and (6) the assumptions underlying elective programs strongly encourage the exploration of a variety of alternatives to the teaching and learning of the language arts. Literature, composition, and language electives are discussed, as well as other types of courses, and the critical questions about electives are examined. Part two discusses how to develop raticnale, objectives and courses for elective programs. (LL)

Research
Ideas
Practice

CURRICULUM Report

FROM THE CURRICULUM SERVICE CENTER / NASSP

Vol. 2, No. 4 April, 1973

Speaking of Choices

Part One of a Two-Part Discussion of ALTERNATIVES IN ENGLISH

Points of Difference

English certainly ain't what it used to be, at least not in the ever increasing number of secondary schools where groups of elective courses are replacing, in whole or in part, traditional English offerings which required that all students at a particular grade level follow pretty much the same path through the English curriculum of the school. Elective programs, mini-course curricula, or whatever they may be called represent a radical departure from many of the organizational patterns and from a substantial part of the content of the English courses which for many years have been the backbone of most high school language arts programs.

This Curriculum Report focuses on these newer courses which, in several instances, will be contrasted with what are referred to as "traditional" or "standard" English programs. Lest this contrasting seem by implication unjustifiably to denigrate many non-elective plans of evident merit, let this be a denial of that intent. And if the next few pages suggest that elective plans are quite without limitation or problem, this misunderstanding should be rectified by comments farther on in this CR.

To move ahead, now, the newer elective English programs differ from traditional ones in at least six ways:

(1) Elective programs consist of a wide variety of courses--some containing more than 60 short courses have been observed--in contrast to standard English curricula, which most of the time consist of only English 9, English 10, English 11, and English 12.

George Hillocks, Jr., a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Education and coordinator of the MAT English Program at the University of Chicago, is the author of this Curriculum Report. In preparing it he has drawn on his recent, more extensive study of the topic, which is referred to in the text. Robert Hogan, executive secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English also was helpful in planning this issue of CR.

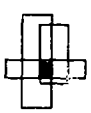
(2) Students are generally free to choose the courses they feel will be most meaningful to them. A few programs do have minimal requirements in certain areas such as American literature or composition, and some offer elective opportunities only at 11th and 12th grade levels. But most have no such requirements and make elective courses available to students from the 9th or 10th grades through the 12th.

(3) Most programs permit ALL students to select courses they want, regardless of their grade levels. The result is that a given elective may enroll about equal numbers of, say, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders. The assumption here is that segregation by chronological age level makes little sense--an assumption supported by a considerable body of recent theory and research.

(4) By their very nature, most elective programs insist upon a greater awareness of individual student abilities and interests. These programs recognize that the standard American literature course is not appropriate for all students.

(5) They produce, or at least reflect, a much stronger sense of professionalism among teachers of English. Under traditional programs the curriculum was pretty well frozen. But the development of elective plans and courses have given teachers expanded opportunities to assume responsibility for curriculum planning, a responsibility which is apparently being accepted with enthusiasm by numbers of teachers.

(6) The assumptions underlying elective programs strongly encourage the exploration of a variety of alternatives to the teaching and learning of the language arts, whereas traditional curricula stressed the importance of making certain that all students were given the same background, thus almost ensuring a stagnant curriculum.



Other Characteristics

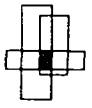
There are several other noteworthy features common to many elective English programs, among which are these.

- Most programs offer one-semester courses, but many other schools have established courses that run for only six, nine, or twelve weeks. And there are some that employ a mixture of course lengths.

- Although this curriculum pattern is most often observable at the senior high school level, at least a few junior high schools have begun to include electives in their 7th, 8th, and 9th grade English programs.

- Ordinarily, a description of course offerings is available well in advance of the decision-making point, which students can examine and use as a basis for making their selections. They usually are asked to indicate two or three choices, and program coordinators make every effort to schedule students for their first preferences. In some schools it is the practice to schedule students into a time slot for English, which means that students' selections among electives are limited to whatever courses are available during that interval.

There are a number of other steps schools often take to help students make appropriate choices from among the English electives. For instance, teachers may take some class time to discuss possibilities with their students. In a few schools it is possible for students to attend a special presentation on the courses to be offered. Some English departments work closely with members of the school's guidance staff, who are briefed on the various elective courses, their contents, levels of difficulty, and so on. The counselors can then provide maximum assistance to young people as they make their course selections.



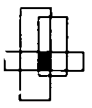
Hundreds of Courses

It is evident from a recent study of secondary school English curricula around the country (Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs. Urbana: NCTE/ERIC, 1972) that the elective system has the potential of offering to high school students a wide variety of courses that are distinctly different from the options available in standard, non-elective programs. A few course names will illustrate that difference: "The Natural History of New York City," "Photography," "The Political Economists," and "Introduction to Philosophy."

However, such courses represent only a fraction of the total of 1,990 courses offered by the 70 programs examined. The majority of courses are rather easily divided into the types that have been traditional offerings in English programs. More specifically, of the 25 major varieties of courses present in at least 20 of the 70 programs examined,

- More than 60 percent of the 1,990 belong in the literature category;
- Even if journalism is included, less than 20 percent of all the courses deal explicitly with composition;
- No type of language course appears in these most frequent 25 varieties; the most frequently offered "language" course was found to be of the grammar-mechanics type, which was found in 19 of the 70 programs; and
- Among these more frequently-found courses are four that have always been offered on an elective basis, either within the English family of courses or outside: Speech, Journalism, Theatre Arts, and Debate.

These and other data are shown in more detail in the table on the next page.



More About Literature Electives

When the 60 percent of courses that can be put in the "literature" category, as mentioned above, are examined more closely, a number of important sub-categories appear, some of which are quite familiar:

- Of the literature electives, 53 percent fall into subgroups suggested by the long-time offerings of secondary schools and colleges: drama, shortstory, novel, poetry, surveys of literature, "author" courses--mainly Shakespeare.
- Another 10 percent are related to various other traditional offerings of college literature programs.

The 25 Types of Elective Courses Most Frequently Found in 70 English Programs and Which Offer a Total of 1990 Elective Courses*

Course Type	Programs Offering Type		Total No. of Course
	No.	Percent	of the Type
Utilitarian Writing	57	81%	111
Creative Writing	57	81	71
Shakespeare	48	69	61
Drama (Non-Shakespearean)	46	66	63
Poetry	45	64	56
Thematic Literature Courses	43	61	201
Speech	43	61	75
Journalism	42	60	92
American Literature Survey	40	57	85
Theatre Arts, Play Production	39	56	80
Novel	38	54	57
World Literature	36	51	43
Myth	35	50	42
Mass Media	34	49	39
English Literature Survey	32	46	57
Independent Study	31	44	42
Short Story	29	41	35
Developmental Reading	27	39	41
Film Study	27	39	31
Humanities	26	37	39
Science Fiction	25	36	28
Mixed Genre	24	34	30
Vocational English	23	33	37
Debate	22	31	34
Bible as Literature	21	30	22

*Adapted from Table 1 in George Hillocks, Jr., Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs

However, the remainder of the literature-type electives that were operating in the 70 school programs studied do suggest trends away from the widespread practice of duplicating college-type courses in the high school English curriculum. For example,

- A full 20 percent of the literature courses had a thematic focus; and
- Courses in such areas as myth, science fiction, humor, mystery, and horror make up the remainder of the literature offerings.

It must be noted, though, that most of the courses that depart from the survey-genre-author-period syndrome were concentrated in a relatively few of the school programs examined. Nonetheless, there appears to be increasing recognition that survey and genre courses may not offer the most enticing approaches to the study of literature for many high school students.

Details from a few specific high school programs will, perhaps, make the nature of this "trend away" clearer. But before taking up these illustrations a few words about two of the terms that are being used may be helpful, especially to readers not intimately associated with the teaching of English.

> Perhaps the most important difference between thematic courses and those of the survey/genre sort is the kind of focus each approach provides for the study of literature. A course on the short story, for instance, naturally focuses on the formal characteristics of short fiction, and a survey course appropriately deals with such things as literary history. In contrast, a course with a thematic focus will concentrate on the substance of the work itself--what the author has to say and why and how he says it.
>
> This difference is an important one for high school young people. Questions of formal characteristics, literary history, and so on are important to literary scholars and advanced students, but they are hardly meaningful to most high school readers, who are much more concerned with what a book says to them.

R. A. LONG HIGH SCHOOL, Longview, Washington. Although it retains an American literature requirement, the English department here has dropped its traditional survey of American literature. In its place the school now requires that each student take one of six thematically organized courses. The six have been developed in varying degrees of difficulty. One of the easier courses is entitled "Frontiers in American Literature" and is described as an examination of "the extremely mobile, adventurous, and capable immigrants from Puritans to the present who have accepted the challenge of new frontiers." This course makes use of some selections from a standard anthology as well as Fifteen Stories from the Old West, Fahrenheit 451, Shane, and other selected prose and verse.

A more difficult course--"The Minority Experience in America: Down a Lonesome Road"--presents "a look at various people who have felt outside the mainstream of life in America, from Roger Williams to James Baldwin." Here, too, some use is made of a standard anthology, but the reading goes far beyond to include Huckleberry Finn, Black Boy, The Chosen, Raisin in the Sun, The Catcher in the Rye, The Glass Menagerie, and The Assistant.

The most difficult of the six courses is called "Moral Responsibility in America" and concerns itself with the more abstract problems of "good and evil, the struggle for equality and justice, and the nature of man." Readings for this course include Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, Intruder in the Dust, The Crucible, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, and The Sandbox.

- POWAY HIGH SCHOOL, Poway, California. In 1969, Poway's Course of Study outline mentioned two semester-long survey courses in American literature and two more in English literature. But by 1971 these four one-semester surveys had given way to a series of nine-week courses, each concentrating on some particular aspect of American or English literature. The American sequence, for example, includes "Five Modern Novelists," "The Lost Generation," "Science Fiction, Fantasy, and The Supernatural," "American Folklore," and "The Struggle for Freedom: Protest Literature in America."

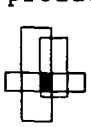
  In this new sequence of courses, chronology is no longer the basis for course organization. Instead, each course has a conceptual base which provides the integrating element in selecting and using the various materials to be studied. More important, by delimiting the range of concern of each of these courses time is provided for reading and responding intelligently to the works read and for exploring the ideas which they inevitably suggest.

- NATHAN HALE HIGH SCHOOL, Tulsa, Oklahoma. The English curriculum at Nathan Hale includes a series of six courses on the idea of the hero. The least difficult course in this series deals with "the hero of the West, the war hero, the spy and detective, the political and other modern heroes, and the more recent anti-hero." Materials for the course include Shane, To Hell and Back, The Untouchables, The Spies, and Profiles in Courage.

  Another course on the anti-hero begins with a classical definition of the tragic hero, and its reading list contains such works as Dr. No, Goldfinger, The Outsiders, A Separate Peace, Macbeth, Henry IV (Part I), and Richard III.

- WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL, South Bend, Indiana. Quite a number of thematic elective courses are converned with that complex of personal problems commonly referred to as "the search for identity." One such course is offered at Washington High in which students consider questions like "What am I?" "What is my place in the World?" and "How can I adjust to a place in the adult world?" To examine these problems, students read such literature as The Learning Tree, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Fathers and Sons, Siddartha, The Stranger, Walden, and a collection of essays.

  Another fairly numerous group of theme-based literature electives are built on major social concerns such as love, war, the minority experience, justice, and politics. Themes such as these permit the use of a wide variety of readings and other materials. Another course at Washington High in South Bend--"War: A Universal Tragedy"--is a good illustration of such English offerings. In this course, young people read such volumes as Mother Courage, What Price Glory? All Quiet on the Western Front, They Were Expendable, Where Is Vietnam? and For Whom the Bell Tolls as well as some poetry. But in addition use is made of an interesting set of films: "The Yanks Are Coming," Victory at Sea," "Hiroshima-Nagasaki," and "Night and Fog." Current and relevant TV productions and cartoons are also part of this literature course.



The Study of Composition

A second major component of English study in American secondary schools has always been writing. But in elective programs the study of composition frequently is offered in separate courses rather than as an element of a more general course, the more usual approach. In fact, 57 of the 70 English programs looked at included separate courses in what might best be called utilitarian writing, and 57--not quite the same 57--also have special courses in creative writing. Actual composition

instruction appears to be confined to these two kinds of elective courses. Although many programs claim to include composition in all of their courses, curriculum guides as a rule make no explicit statements about the nature of any instruction in composition that may go on outside the composition courses themselves. The curriculum guides may suggest assignments--which is something considerably different from instruction!

Several of the schools in the study group listed more than one option open to students who choose to take a course or courses devoted primarily to writing. A school might, for example, offer:

(1) an introductory or basic composition course,

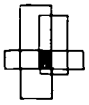
(2) advanced composition

(3) a course in research writing, and

(4) creative writing.

Whether this array of courses represents an increased emphasis on composition over that found in traditional programs is difficult to say, though a great deal of what passes for composition instruction in most high school English programs is little more than the assign-collect-and-correct sequence of activities, which by the evidence seems to accomplish little in the way of improving students' ability to write.

Separate composition courses--whether within elective patterns such as are being discussed here or as electives within the usual set-up--have at least the virtue of giving teachers the opportunity to concentrate on composition, which has notoriously been relegated to second-class status in favor of literature in most English programs.



Attention to Language

Linguistic approaches to language study have received a great deal of attention in the last few years, but this attention apparently has had little positive effect on elective programs in secondary school English. At the same time, though, the study of traditional, Latinate grammar has been receding from the prominent position it once held in all high schools--and continues to hold in some.

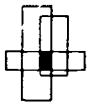
Out of the nearly 2,000 courses that were tabulated, only 65 take language as their particular province. These 65 fall into three categories: (a) modern grammar, (b) general language, and (c) traditional school grammar and mechanics. Many other courses, to be sure, do deal with some aspects of language. Business English courses, for instance, usually have a strong traditional grammar/mechanics component. Communications courses sometimes give attention to semantics and logic. And, of course, many literature courses concern themselves with the interpretation of figurative language and "literary devices."

A few of the general language courses such as those developed at Concord High School in Mt. Diablo, Calif., and Trenton (Mich.) High School are based on modern knowledge and scholarship in the language field, and have been worked up as introductions to key concepts about the nature and development of language. The Trenton course, for example, provides introductions to such topics as

- the systematic nature of language
- the relationship between language and reality

- the history of English
- the assumptions underlying traditional grammar
- structural and generative grammar
- dialect
- levels of usage

Only 11 courses were found that deal exclusively with structural or transformational grammar. Nearly three times as many (30) focus on the usual Latinate grammar of the schools. In addition, business English and "practical" or "basic" English courses tend to devote considerable time to grammar and usage. But attention to grammar appears to be on the decline, at least in the schools considered here that are converting part or all of their offerings to an elective, short-course basis.



Still Other Types of Courses

In addition to courses of the several kinds that have already been described, most secondary school English curricula also include some of the well-known English-related electives: speech, play production, debate, journalism, and so on. Some schools offer mass media courses (34), film study (27), and film making (10). And there were signs among the schools studied of increased emphasis on reading courses--27 of the 70 schools have special developmental reading courses, though only 16 provide opportunities for students to take corrective reading work.

Independent study courses are among the most interesting curricular innovations to be found in elective English programs, since they give students the opportunity to develop their own study plans and courses. Of the 70 schools, 31 indicated that they provide their students this kind of opportunity.

Some of the independent study plans require only that a student read books of his or her own choosing and keep a journal relating to the reading that was done. But other schools require a student who wants to carry on independent study to lay out with the help of an instructor a plan of study he or she proposes to follow, and to develop a paper based on the independent research.

But some of the courses included in a few elective programs have little relationship or similarity to the traditional approaches to the teaching of English. However, courses of this kind--two illustrations follow--when carefully developed do reflect the great potential elective programs have for generating or creating new and meaningful course structures.

The first example is the English course titled "Humanities I" in the high school at Trenton, Mich. Most courses with labels like that turn out to be disjointed attempts to cover two or three thousand years of philosophy, literature, plastic arts, and music all in 10 or 18 weeks. The Trenton course is markedly different, for the Trenton staff started by considering the abilities and interests of the students who would be likely to enroll in the course.

- Humanities I deals with the physical, pictorial, and musical environments of the students. A few comments on how the section on physical environment unfolds will show the general design of this course. It begins with an

examination of the architecture that students find around them--offices, bars, hotels, schools, and so on--which naturally leads to discussions of student preferences.

- Next, students consider "more aesthetic architecture" such as may be found in structures like museums and churches.

- From this study of architecture that is close to the students' experiences they turn to the problem of "whether function or form should be the deciding factor in commercial architecture." and from here attention moves to the contemporary theories of domestic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and others.

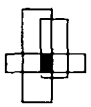
- Toward the end of this section of the course on the physical environment, each student describes a natural setting for a home, makes up a floor plan, and sketches a picture of the final home and its landscaping.

- The other two major segments of the course proceed in this same manner, that is, from the immediate experience of the student to the more complex and esoteric.

- Another unusual English course if "The Literature of Sports" at Burbank (California) High School. Its stated purpose is "to force students to deal with the deeper meaning of athletics and sports as a major force in American society." In the process of reading and writing students deal with such questions as:

  - ✓ What are the pressures and demands on amateur and professional athletes?
  - ✓ What are the rewards?
  - ✓ What are the goals that lead men and women to careers in athletics?
  - ✓ What effect does their profession have on their value systems?
  - ✓ What is the relationship between athletics and an education?

The course naturally develops many other questions; questions which students must answer on the basis of their reading, interviews with people in sports, and their own experience.



Critical Questions

These two and others in the galaxy of elective courses prompt skeptics to ask: "But is it an English course?" Rather ask, "Does this course develop the student's ability to examine his own experience meaningfully and critically through the medium of language?"

This latter question brings us face to face with the irritating but unavoidable problem of what English programs in general and elective plans in particular are all about in the first place, because developing an elective program demands that teachers rethink the process of English instruction and abandon many of the practices and beliefs they have long held in high esteem. For example,

- ✓ What should be the content?
- ✓ How should it be integrated?

✓ What attitudes should result from a good English program?

✓ What skills should be developed, and how can their development be built into the program?

✓ How can English be taught so that students will come to appreciate literature and enjoy writing?

Comments on these and some other critical questions are being reserved for Part Two of this discussion of Alternatives in English to provide space in this Part for brief descriptions of a number of English programs that illustrate the use of the elective-course curriculum pattern in exemplary manner. In each instance, a staff member is named who will be pleased to provide further information.

Exempli Gratia

e g O.L. SMITH SCHOOL, 23851 Yale, Dearborn, Mich. 48124
Belinda Fendy, Chairman, English Department

O. L. Smith is one of the few junior high schools offering an elective program. Its courses are 10 weeks in length and were developed only after a rather careful survey of student interests was conducted. The program includes such courses as Fundamental English, Basic Reading Skills, Film Explorations, Myths, Legends and Folklore, Contemporary Humanities, Communication Arts, Individualized Reading, and so forth. The faculty has developed various methods of helping students to select appropriate courses.

e g BURBANK SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 902 N. Third Street, Burbank, Calif. 91502
Caroline Barnes, Curriculum Coordinator

The Burbank High School program includes a wide variety of over 35 courses ranging from Adventure to the Old Testament as Literature. Several of the courses are surveys of national literatures: Japanese, Russian, Canadian, European, Greek and Roman, and Latin American. In addition, the program includes courses to appeal to the less academic student: Mystery and Suspense, Mythology and Folklore, Science Fiction, and an interesting course called The Literature of Sports. The program also includes courses such as Reference Skills, Individualized Reading, Mass Media, and Film as Art.

e g TRENTON HIGH SCHOOL, 2601 Charlton Road, Trenton, Mich. 48183
Donald F. Weise, English Department Chairman

The Trenton program has probably received more publicity than any other elective program in English. It has been the model for the development of elective programs in a number of other schools. Some of the most striking aspects of the program are its carefully developed remedial reading courses, its down-to-earth course called Humanities I which was described above, and courses such as one called Seminar in New Dimensions. The latter course was "designed to explore frontier developments in any aspects of man's existence" and was developed specifically for non-learners "whether they are intellectually slow or bright. . . who have a high potential for dropping out and a consistent unwillingness to function in a usual classroom setting." The primary emphasis of the course is to involve students in learning. To do this, normal classroom procedures and even the normal classroom are largely ignored. This course and a number of the others are well worth examining.

CONCORD HIGH SCHOOL, Mt. Diablo Unified School District, 4200 Concord Blvd., Concord, Calif. 94521
Thomas L. Gage, Supervisor of English

The 38 courses in the Concord High School program grow out of a carefully developed rationale. The program offers five courses in language, eight courses in composition (two of which are in creative writing), a set of courses in literature, including film study, as well as courses in speech, drama, journalism, and humanities. The courses in the language composition and literature strands of the program are intended to "reinforce the organic principle that language is a symbolic system which is about 'something else,' and that the three strands are merely different aspects of the same thing."

SOUTH BEND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, South Bend, Indiana 46624
Richard Schurr, Supervisor of English

The seven South Bend Community High Schools all operate on elective programs in English. One large curriculum volume contains course descriptions divided into several categories: composition and language development, modern media, reading, literature, and speech and drama. Nearly all the literature courses are thematic in nature, reflecting such themes as Consequences of War, Dreams of Men, The Good Guys, Illusion Versus Reality, The Many Aspects of Love, Politics and Literature, Self Discovery, and the Struggle for Justice. Each course makes good use of various media and a variety of reading materials and integrates the various language arts skills.

WEST LAFAYETTE HIGH SCHOOL, Leslie and Grant, West Lafayette, Ind. 47906
Bernarr Folta, English Department Chairman

The West Lafayette program includes three semesters of required English courses: one at the freshman level called Humanities I, a second at the sophomore level in American Literature, and a third at the junior level in English Literature. The remainder of the courses are elective courses of 9, 18, or 36 weeks duration. A sizeable number of the electives, especially the nine week ones, are thematic in nature. The program also offers courses such as business English for 18 weeks, principles of oral communication for 18 weeks, developmental reading, basic grammar and usage, the novel, nine weeks, and film production for nine weeks' each.

WALTER HINES PAGE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 201 Page Street, Greensboro, N. Car. 27405
Mrs. Carolyn L. Lithgo, Language Arts Coordinator

The course offerings in the Page High School elective program are divided into four categories: language, literature, composition, and mass media. Courses "in all areas involve reading, writing, listening, speaking, and vocabulary building." Those in the composition area include the ordinary courses in composition plus dramatics and speech. The mass media area includes courses in the Art of Film, Script Writing, and various courses in journalism and yearbook, as well as a course entitled Print, Sight, Sound: Mass Media Survey. The language area includes one course on the nature of history of language and two courses in modern grammar and linguistics as well as courses in business communications. The literature area includes a sequence of reading courses, a set of thematically organized courses, various genre courses, and others.

POWAY HIGH SCHOOL, 13626 Twin Peaks Road, Poway, Calif. 92064
Frank J. Barone, English Department Chairman

The Poway High School program offers a variety of courses including two which are called Practical English but which have little in common with the usual Practical English course which focuses on grammar and mechanics. One deals with Television as an Informational Medium and the other with Television as an Entertainment Medium. Each course is nine weeks in length. The first includes such topics as advertising, news coverage, documentaries, and adult education. The second course deals with a variety of topics from the effects of television viewing on children to developing and producing an original TV program. Both courses involve a high level of critical thinking. Many courses in the Poway program have prerequisites, a device that does not occur very often in elective programs.

WHITMER HIGH SCHOOL, 5601 Clegg Dr., Washington Local Schools, Lucas County, Ohio 43613
Margaret W. Towe, English Department Chairman

The Whitmer elective program offers a variety of courses with one course required of all students: Communications. The most unusual feature of the program is that each course is offered at one or more levels of difficulty. Thus a student might elect to take the course in Humor in a section of the course which utilizes rather difficult materials. Another student electing the same course might go into a section which makes use of rather easy materials. However, the program description states that once a student shows progress and "has learned the materials and the concepts at that particular level, he will then move up to the next phase."

R. A. LONG HIGH SCHOOL, Long View, Wash. 98632
Flavia Loeb, English Department Chairman

The R. A. Long elective program makes use of some rather loose requirements. For example, in the sophomore year the student must take Composition I and a literature course. In the junior year he must take an additional composition course and one of several American literature courses. In his senior year he must simply complete two additional semesters of English. An interesting aspect of the R. A. Long program is its American literature offerings which have been described above. Briefly, they consist of six thematically organized courses at various levels of difficulty which provide introductions to American literature.

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Editor's Note *This discussion of elective programs in English will be continued in the next issue of Curriculum Report. From the outset, Professor Hillocks was encouraged to use the requirements of the subject rather than CR precedent to determine the length of his paper, and the manuscript he developed was longer than the usual CR text. Rather than resort to major and possibly disfiguring editorial surgery, it was decided to break another tradition and devote two consecutive issues to the consideration of one topic. What has been begun here will be concluded in CR Vol. 2, No. 5*

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CURRICULUM Report

FROM THE CURRICULUM SERVICE CENTER / NASSP

Vol. 2, No. 5 May 1973

Making the Choices

Part Two of a Two-Part Discussion of ALTERNATIVES IN ENGLISH

Editor's Introduction *Last year, Professor George Hillocks, Jr., coordinator of the MAT Program in English at the University of Chicago, made a critical appraisal of elective programs in English in 70 American secondary schools. In Curriculum Report No. 4 he summarized some of the practices he observed in those 70 schools. In this issue of CR Professor Hillocks continues his discussion of alternatives in English by commenting on a number of requisites for a strong English curriculum. His primary concern here, as in No. 4, is with the improvement of elective programs, but much of what he has to say appears to be equally applicable to English programs of the more usual sort.*

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The Real Test

The titles of many of the elective courses available to students in the 70 schools whose English programs were studied lead many to wonder whether these courses really belong in the English curriculum. (Similar uncertainties also crop up in other disciplines with the development of new subject combinations and course patterns.) However, to stay with the field of English, the fundamental test to be applied to all courses, be they in the traditional or in the newer elective mode, is: Does this course develop the student's ability to examine his own experience meaningfully and critically through the medium of language?

This criterion can be applied only if answers to several other bothersome but critical questions are in hand; e.g., What should be the content of an English program? What are the skills to be developed by the program? How can the teaching/learning of these skills be built into the English program? What attitudes ought a good English program develop on the part of students?

None of these questions is particularly easy to answer, but planners of elective programs must at least attempt to answer them. A consistent set of beliefs concerning what English is all about--a rationale--is essential.

Too Little Rhyme or Reason

An examination of curriculum documents and published articles about the 70 English programs studied revealed only a single school that had described a rationale for the courses contained in its elective program. The others made no indication of why particular courses were being offered.

The lack of rationale in most programs resulted in a sometimes peculiar assortment of courses. For example,

- ✓ One program contained two or three courses on the novel but no course in drama;
- ✓ A great many programs offered one or more courses in Shakespeare but no course focusing on any other writer;
- ✓ Of the 1990 courses examined not a single one focused on such an important American writer as Mark Twain; and
- ✓ No program gave any rationale for a course on a single writer at the high school level.

Even more peculiar anomalies occurred. Why should a course on the political economists be included in an English curriculum? Why should a course on sports, in which coaches and players explain their sports and in which students are not asked to do any reading or writing appear in an English program?

Talks with several English department chairmen revealed one method that seems to be often used in deciding on elective course offerings: (1) Teachers listed as many course topics as they could think of on the chalkboard, and then (2) they went over these topics in an effort to decide which they were interested in offering. Unfortunately, this procedure is not likely to result in a carefully wrought program!

- Courses in literature should be designed to help students increase their power in interpreting literature. Thus, the array of courses in a given program ought to reflect a systematic analysis of the various levels of difficulty in the interpretation of literature. To illustrate,

  (a) A basic course might focus on what happens in a work of literature and the simpler implications of the events;

  (b) A somewhat more difficult course might focus on interpreting the implied relationships among characters, events, and images; and

  (c) An even more sophisticated course might focus on works in which the central significance derives from irony, structural contrasts, and symbolism.

  The works studied in such a series of courses would vary according to the difficulty of ascertaining their implied meanings.

- In addition, writers of a program rationale need to decide how important instruction in composition will be. The questions they should consider include,

  - Should instruction in composition be confined to one or two or three courses, or should it be included in all courses?

- If composition instruction is restricted to a few courses, should students be required to take one or more of these courses?

- If composition instruction is included in all courses, is there a way to assure that all students will deal with the essential aspects of the composing process during their secondary school years?

To be sure, rationale writers may decide that composition instruction is not important. (It appears that some program designers have made just that decision.)

Naturally, similar arguments and decisions need to be presented for other types of courses. In short, the development of a rationale should necessarily involve asking hard questions and obtaining rigorous answers concerning what is important in English. If nothing is important, then almost anything at all can be offered: "The History of Rock Music," "Photography," "The Natural History of Chicago," or any other whimsical topic that presents itself. But if teachers decide that certain aspects of English studies are important, then these aspects should be incorporated into the program in a systematic way.

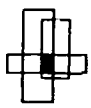
Further, a strong rationale will deal with the relationships among the multiple aspects of English studies, and it will determine the extent to which those aspects ought to be integrated and how best to integrate them. If no integration is necessary, the rationale will make that point explicit.

While standard English programs simply operate on the basis of tradition and ordinarily present no carefully developed rationale for their existence, there is no reason why elective programs should do the same. In the past, teachers have assumed that their job was to teach the existing curriculum. They tended to see themselves as skilled laborers, as people who were to deal with already existing structures and procedures. With the advent of elective programs, however, teachers have become much more than artisans; they have assumed a truly professional responsibility: that of

thinking through the basic premises of what they deal with,

asking and answering key questions about their subjects, and

developing and evaluating appropriate procedures.



And Too Little Time

The activities essential to carrying out this professional responsibility require time on the part of the teacher. But a typical English teacher may meet 130 to 200 students a day. That teacher is also faced with marking students' compositions, with planning their instruction in literature, and with doing heaven knows how many other duties around school.

It should be no surprise, then, to anyone familiar with the English classroom teacher's Herculean tasks that many elective programs lack adequate rationales and that designs for elective courses appear to have been merely lifted from the traditional English program or to have been worked up from college notes. Furthermore, many of these courses do not integrate the language arts areas, do not fulfill their promise of meeting individual differences in interest and ability, and do not provide adequate opportunities for evaluating the effectiveness of instruction.

Under normal teaching conditions, teachers do not have the time to think through these problems. Those teachers who do know how to develop sound curricula are likely

to be even more discouraged with the problems than those who do not know how; those who understand how difficult the problems are, how much time the solving of them may take, and how little time they have to work on them may simply give up.

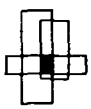
Nonetheless, the picture is not entirely dark, for even with the heavy day-to-day burden that most English teachers bear it is evident from the increasing number of elective programs that teachers are indeed willing to make the extended efforts that improve curricular offerings in English.

Administrators who seriously wish to support the efforts of teachers in developing elective programs cannot do better than to provide them with released time. Verbal encouragement is always nice to have, but the real encouragement comes from reduced loads for the curriculum makers. This can be brought about through

- released time during the school year,
- summer workshops that give teachers the opportunity to work together, and
- weekend curriculum institutes spread throughout the year.

It cannot be stressed too emphatically that time is an absolute necessity; time for such essential activities as

- ✓ rethinking the basic assumptions underlying their current curricular models,
- ✓ developing new assumptions and models to fit them,
- ✓ finding new materials,
- ✓ developing new procedures, and
- ✓ thinking out methods for evaluating the effectiveness of their instruction.



Time for Specifics, Too

If time is necessary in thinking out a rationale for a total elective program, it is even more necessary in planning specific courses. The school might have the most comprehensive and defensible rationale in the world, but without careful attention to the details of actual courses the program as a whole could be a complete flop. Indeed, lack of time may well be the chief culprit in the selection and design of a great many courses currently existing in elective English programs.

As an English faculty develops the basic principles and purposes that are to guide the development of its elective program, that rationale will suggest the kinds of courses needed in that program. And surveys of student interests and abilities will indicate the levels of difficulty the various courses will take. But once the type of course has been decided, and once the level of difficulty or sophistication has been established, the real work has only begun. From that point on, teachers

(1) must determine what each course is supposed to accomplish for its clientele,

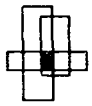
(2) must seek out appropriate materials,

(3) must design procedures that will be both interesting and enlightening,

(4) must work out effective methods of integrating the various language arts skills in each course, and

(5) must develop procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of their own instruction.

All of these activities require careful study, and careful study means time.



Needed: Clear Language about English

Course objectives ought to be defined as clearly as possible even in the ambiguous world of English studies. Of the 70 programs studied, a few had carefully defined the goals for each course, but most statements of goals were so vague that writing them had been only a waste of precious time.

Many of the general objectives stated for particular courses seem applicable to the educational process as a whole. For instance, one program lists the following objective for a course on social protest, "To deepen the student's sense of history, increase his capacity for compassion, and help him come to a better understanding of himself and his place in the world." Of the 22 courses listed in this particular program, not one other had a similar objective. Certainly, that does not mean that compassion will be developed in this course and ignored in the others.

Rather than jettison such broadly stated but important general purposes of education, an English faculty might develop a set of educational purposes they feel are applicable to all the courses in the elective program. In addition, however, specific objectives should be developed for each course, but these should not be so sweeping or equivocal that they defy any attempt to use them to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction.

An objective for one of the Shakespeare courses observed in the study of elective programs calls for "the study of Shakespeare's poetry for further insight into his poetic command." There is no way for a teacher to investigate the validity of that objective or his success in achieving it until he works out the meanings of such words as "insight" and "poetic command." But that objective can be converted into something like this:

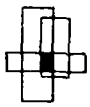
> *To choose two or three key passages, each of 10 lines or more, from a Shakespeare play studied independently and to write an essay explaining how the language, imagery, and action of the passages are related to other passages and to some central theme of the play. Stating the theme and choosing the key passages are the students' options. The important thing is to explain the relationships among them.*

This version of the objective defines the task which the student is to perform by the end of the course, permits the teacher to make some judgment about the success of his instruction, and enables him to determine the validity of the objective itself. If the task as defined in this objective is too difficult for the students, the objective can be revised, but with ambiguous objectives of the "further insight" kind there is no way of determining whether or not they are appropriate.

One important and frequently stated goal of elective programs is to meet the individual needs, abilities, and interests of students. It is ordinarily assumed that by allowing students to select the courses they will take, instruction has been individualized. But even when the difficulty level of a course is indicated to a student and even when he or she has read a description of the course, it is still ...d for the student to know whether that particular course will be appropriate to

his own abilities. Furthermore, since in most programs of the kind we are considering here students are permitted to select whichever courses they wish, it is very likely that the students in any given course will represent a fairly wide range of abilities and interests. For these and other reasons, it would seem useful and desirable for teachers to examine systematically the abilities of the students actually enrolled in their classes.

Perhaps such assessments could be built into the first elective course a student takes in a particular school year, and the results of these inventories might be passed along to the student's next teacher with a report on his progress in the course he or she has just completed. Such inventories need not be standardized tests! Informal, teacher-made instruments for assessing students' skills and abilities in reading, in the interpretation of literature, and in composition can be developed for use in each course.



Integrate Language Skills?

Many elective program descriptions declare the intention to integrate the language arts skills into every course. But although some reading is assigned in composition courses and some writing in literature courses, instruction in either is usually confined to one focus or the other. If the intent of a program is to integrate the development of skills with other aspects of English instruction, then careful examination of various methods for accomplishing the integration is necessary.

Certain courses may be more conducive to such integration than others, but it is possible in all but the most narrowly specialized ones. Generally, though, thematic courses offer greater opportunities for integration of language arts activities than others do. An illustration will show the possibilities here. A course dealing with responses to war could easily include

(a) work with fiction, poetry, and drama;

(b) instruction in various types of writing, both critical and creative;

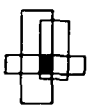
(c) dramatic presentations of prepared scripts and improvised situations;

(d) student-led small group discussions of various types;

(e) debates over key issues raised in the course; and

(f) viewing and discussion of films.

Further, it is possible to plan for such activities so that they grow out of one another and are not simply imposed on students in a mechanical fashion.



New Programs, New Attitudes?

By and large, the teachers and administrators in charge of elective programs are very pleased with the results. They feel that students are happier with the English courses they are taking and that teachers are happier in teaching courses which represent their personal interests. Unfortunately, however, there have been few systematic evaluations of elective programs. But the extensive evaluation of Project Apex at Trenton (Michigan) High School, which is referred to in the bibliography, confirms what most supervisors of elective programs report; namely, that students in that program had more positive attitudes toward their English courses than students in schools of similar socioeconomic backgrounds with traditional programs.

It is worth noting that at a time when overcrowding and scheduling problems resulted in more negative attitudes toward high school as a whole, positive attitudes toward the study of English continued to increase. However, these favorable attitudes seem to be the result of the wide variety of classroom activities and the openness of teachers in encouraging the expression of student ideas rather than the result of increased interest in composition and literature. Curiously, the Apex Project data indicated that attitudes toward literature and composition either did not change or became somewhat less positive. Results of surveys made in other schools also point to strong favorable attitudes toward the elective system, but less positive attitudes toward literature and composition.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the tests of reading and writing used in evaluating the Trenton program was that there was very little difference in performance in these two skill areas, even though the program had undergone a radical change in the direction of involving students in a wide choice of activities other than the reading and writing experiences which dominate traditional programs.

To restate the foregoing, even though students in elective English programs may be doing less reading and writing than is done in traditional programs and doing reading and writing of a different kind, their test scores do not appear to be much influenced by the change. At the same time, it is obvious that they are being exposed to a richer experience than they would encounter in a customary program.

Some educators seem reluctant to submit elective programs to systematic evaluation. The defense frequently is: "We never evaluated the traditional programs." True enough, and that itself may be in large part responsible for the failure of traditional programs to produce interested, perceptive readers and effective writers. Elective programs should not risk a similar fate.

No one or two procedures can be regarded as adequate for the analysis of a total curriculum in English. As many procedures as feasible should be used. To mention only a few,

- regular and careful analysis by the faculty of the program rationale as it relates to courses offered,
- regular analysis by the faculty of the course designs to ensure that sound ideas are implemented and weak ones eliminated,
- systematic inter-classroom visitation by faculty and administrators with the notion of discovering what procedures work well,
- administration on a planned basis of a carefully developed questionnaire to monitor negative and positive changes in student attitudes toward courses, activities, and subject matter,
- use of teacher-made pre- and post-tests to help determine the effectiveness of instruction in meeting specific course goals, and
- standardized tests administered in early fall to 10th graders and in early spring to seniors to monitor progress in reading and writing.

Evaluation procedures are not the same as search-and-destroy missions. They can and should be part of any serious endeavor to improve the quality of course offerings and instruction.

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